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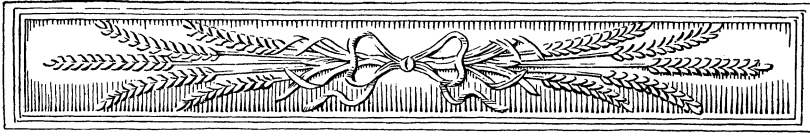
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## AN EXHIBITION OF FURNITURE FROM THE WORKSHOP OF DUNCAN PHYFE

THROUGH the courtesy of a number of its friends, the Museum is able to show, from October 16 to December 15, in the large gallery, D 6, a group of more than one hundred examples of furniture from the workshop of Duncan Phyfe, the New York cabinet-maker. The pieces exhibited are all from New York or its immediate vicinity and, although they show a considerable range of design, they have been limited to Phyfe's best period, which dates before 1825. The exhibition constitutes what is probably the most important group ever gathered together of furniture by a single American cabinet-maker; and in assembling the pieces a number of unusual items came to light, which were unsuspected even by Phyfe enthusiasts. Phyfe, too, is the one American cabinet-maker to whom it is possible definitely to attribute a large group of furniture upon other than circumstantial evidence.

The first quarter of the nineteenth century, like all transitional periods, was in the United States one of the most important in its history. Assured of its independence, the new republic was first testing its strength in its internal affairs and in its relations with other nations.

The death of Washington in December, 1799, marked, as it were, the end of one epoch in the country's history and the beginning of a new. He in his lifetime had seen the growth of self-sufficiency in the colonies and its assertion in the war for

independence. He, too, had seen the inauguration of a new form of government whose reins he had held during the trying period of reconstruction, and had assisted in the formation of important national policies.

The years succeeding his death witnessed a testing of the ties which bound together the union for whose creation he had been so largely responsible. Political parties developed which had lain dormant during his presidency, international complications had to be resolved, and large questions of importance to internal

commerce and prosperity arose for answer. Such matters as the Louisiana Purchase took careful handling. The war with England, resulting from the strained relations produced by the Napoleonic conflicts, tried dangerously the unity of the nation, while the improvements in transportation brought up many questions of national improvement, of which the Erie Canal was a strikingly successful example.

In New York City this activity in the nation was reflected in concentrated form. The character of the city changed from that of a provincial town into the beginning



ARMCHAIR BY DUNCAN PHYFE  
SHOWING SHERATON INFLUENCE

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# BULLETIN OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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THE DUNCAN PHYFE EXHIBITION  
(DETAIL)

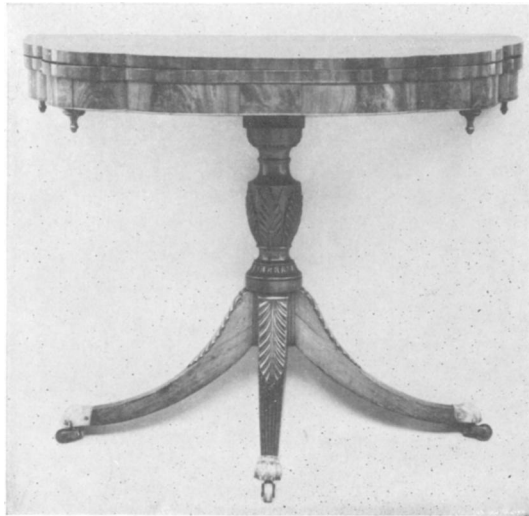
## BULLETIN OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

of a cosmopolitan metropolis. From a leisurely, overgrown village in which Dutch stolidity was mingled with English downrightness, in twenty-five years the town had changed to one whose flavor was predominantly French. This was so markedly true that Mrs. Frances Trollope tells us that she felt herself in a French provincial town during her visit to New York.

Expression to this change was given in many ways—artistically, economically, and scientifically. A group of young writers,

ity of the city was the building of handsome houses. These required furnishing in the prevailing taste which was growing more and more sophisticated. To Duncan Phyfe would seem to have come the patronage of the most prominent people of the time, and in his work may be seen one form of the record of the tastes and customs of his day, its cultural quality and commercial prosperity.

Phyfe's importance to us today is thus twofold. First of all, it forms a record of



PHYFE TABLE SUPPORTED UPON A PEDESTAL WITH  
THREE LEGS

of whom Washington Irving was the particular bright star, created a literature based upon national themes. These writers acted both as recorders of the dying New York of Knickerbocker days and as heralds of a cosmopolitan attitude toward society. Painters such as Vanderlyn and Morse, architects such as McComb and Thompson, were adding to the physical beauties of the city. Fulton, in his forwarding of steam motive power in navigation, Clinton in his championship of the Erie Canal, and Morse in his invention of the telegraph were men of the day whose contributions led to the great commercial advance of the nineteenth century.

A concomitant of the increasing prosper-

a day which is gone. In the second place, his importance arises from the fact that he, as the heir of the great cabinet-makers of the end of the eighteenth century, carrying on their noble traditions of fine design and consummate craftsmanship well into the nineteenth century (farther than they had seemed destined to go), presents in his work an example to modern cabinet-makers of the manner in which furniture for contemporary use may be designed in the terms of an ancient tradition.

Partly as a result of the Industrial Revolution, which occupied almost exclusively the interest of the public throughout the second and third quarters of the century, this tradition broke down at the end



SIDE-CHAIRS  
FROM THE WORKSHOP OF DUNCAN PHYFE

of the first quarter. In searching today for the earlier traditions which may well be revived in the architecture and decorative art of our own time and carried on with the adaptation dictated by modern tastes and usage, the point of departure would seem to lie in the period when Phyfe was at his best and when such notable buildings as the City Hall in New York, the Capitol at Washington, and the State House at Boston were being built.

Duncan Phyfe, a Scotchman by birth, came to this country with his family about 1783, at the age of sixteen years, settling first in Albany, where he plied his trade of cabinet-maker. Attracted by the growing fame of the young metropolis, he came to New York some time early in the 1790's, where after a few years of struggle a fortunate connection was made with certain members of the family of John Jacob

Astor. This meant for him a start in business under the auspices of one of the wealthiest families of the day. From this time on, his output increased continuously, reflecting the changing tastes of the time.

At first his work was purely Hepplewhite and Sheraton in inspiration, but by 1802 or 1803 the artistic influence of France, which was rapidly increasing in the new cosmopolitan New York, brought to him certain elements of Directoire, Consulate, and early Empire origin. These he combined gracefully and successfully with the English forms and details with which he was most familiar. Still later, the heavy, solid lines

of the full French Empire style came into vogue, and much of his furniture was of this type, simplified, ornamented in a restrained manner with gilt-bronze, and possessing, in spite of its over-solidity, the qualities of good craftsmanship and material, as well as of intelligent design. With the period of black walnut and so-called "butcher" furniture, he entered with the public of his day on the downward path of bad taste along

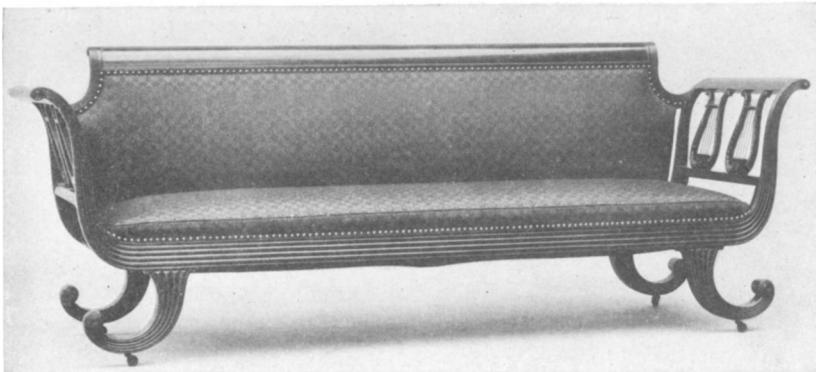
which there was for some time no return. Thus a part of his later work need not be considered as a contribution to the history of furniture design, though it does form a record in the history of taste.

Before 1800 he settled at No. 35 Partition Street, not far from Broadway. As his business grew, we find him increasing his property, first at No. 34 in 1807, then at No. 33 Partition Street in 1811. The original house at No. 35 was still



PHYFE TABLE SUPPORTED BY COUPLED  
COLONNETTES

his dwelling, with the salesrooms next door at No. 34, and the workshop and warehouse at No. 33. Shortly after Robert Fulton's death, in 1815, measures were taken to open a street from the East to the North River, to be called by his name. About this time Phyfe acquired the house directly across from his sales-shop, so that when in 1816-1817 Partition and Fair Streets—the same thoroughfare running east and west of Broadway—were rechristened Fulton Street and the houses renumbered, Phyfe's addresses were Nos. 168, 170, and 172, with his house at No. 169 opposite. The former dwelling house



DUNCAN PHYFE SOFA SHOWING DIRECTOIRE INFLUENCE



DUNCAN PHYFE SOFA OF SHERATON DERIVATION

then became the warehouse. In this street Phyfe lived and worked, within a stone's throw of St. Paul's and not far from the new City Hall. He saw the city grow far to the north and pass through many changes before he retired from business in 1847, and died at his Fulton Street home in 1854. Thus his life bridged the years between the last fine period of artistic effort and the collapse of taste which marked the nineteenth century.

The work of Phyfe, as shown in the Mu-



TABLE WITH THE LYRE PEDESTAL

seum exhibition, falls into certain definite groups. His principal output consisted of chairs, tables, and sofas. In addition to these, he made a number of incidental or important pieces of furniture for special use. Although he is not supposed to have done much case furniture (that is, furniture such as chests of drawers, sideboards, and other pieces with drawers and containers), we still do find a limited number of such pieces as sideboards, dressing tables, and serving tables.<sup>1</sup> Phyfe's furniture varies considerably in the combination of his typical decorative motives. These are too

<sup>1</sup>See *Furniture Masterpieces of Duncan Phyfe*, by Charles O. Cornelius, Chapter III.

many to take up in detail in this place. Among the side-chairs which are shown, there are those with Sheraton influence predominating—horse-shoe seat, reeded diagonal or curved cross-bars in the back, reeded legs and seat-rail. A second type preserves the back and seat of this first type, but the front legs are reversed curves treated on their outside surfaces with a carved acanthus leaf. The full Directoire influence is seen in the most typical of Phyfe chairs, those with the lyre back and legs carved in either the acanthus or the dog-foot pattern, and those with a similar variety of legs, but with a slat in the back made up of an oval medallion between carved scrolls. A type dating from about 1815 has legs made up of crossed reversed curves in Consulate or early Empire form. All of these general types of chair occur with arms, although such are very rare.

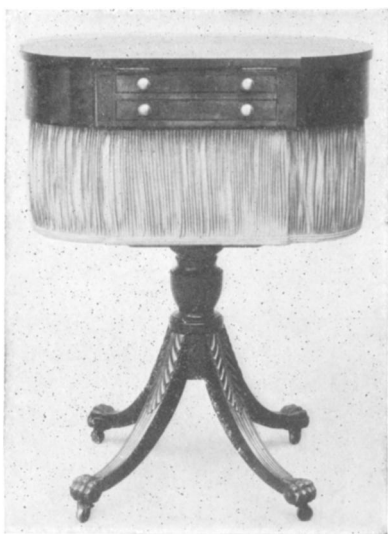
The variety of tables is large. It will suffice here to divide them into three groups which are based upon structure: the tables supported upon legs at the corners, those supported at the ends by coupled colonnettes or lyres, and those supported upon pedestals. The first type stands either upon straight reeded legs, or, as in one rare example, on legs made up of a reverse curve, carved with acanthus and dog foot. Of the type with pedestals there are three sorts. The first is that with a small platform supported on curved legs and in its turn supporting crossed lyres below the superstructure of the table top. The second variation is of this sort, but has instead of lyres four posts or colonnettes. The third sort has an urn-shaped turned member, from which curved legs, three or four in number, sweep outward. Into these various classes fall the tables which are shown in the Museum exhibition.

Sofas there are of types corresponding to the chairs. Perhaps the most characteristic Phyfe sofa is of Sheraton derivation, with a wooden back-rail paneled, carved, or both, wooden framework to arms and seat, and straight reeded legs. These sofas are either upholstered or caned. A different type shows the introduction of Directoire influence, the curved arms, ajouré, set with two delicately carved



lyres. The third type introduces a little more of the Empire influence, though it preserves many of the lines of the Directoire piece. Of this latter type, the legs in one case are made up of a lion foot and eagle wing, while in a second variety are seen the crossed reversed curves of Consulate and Empire provenance. In all of these sofas there is a certain consistency due to the repeated use of the same carved decoration. Of miscellaneous furniture the exhibition shows a group which includes a piano, a sideboard, a pier-glass, buffets

decorative art of the same period. This has helped greatly in modulating between



SEWING TABLE WITH CENTRAL PEDESTAL

and serving tables, a man's dressing table, and wash stands. It includes also the fine four-post bedstead lent by Mrs. Robert W. de Forest.

Certain of Phyfe's details are witnesses to the love of the craft and the pride of workmanship which pervade all of his work. A most apposite example of this is the delicately veneered corner-block which occurs on many tables. The veneer in rectangular or curved form is so unobtrusive as to escape the eye of any but a connoisseur.

In the arrangement of the exhibition an effort has been made to place the furniture in conjunction with various objects of



TABLE WITH SUPPORTING COLONNETTES

the delicacy of the furniture itself and the hugeness of the gallery in which it is shown. On the walls are hung paintings



TABLE WITH URN-SHAPED PEDESTAL

and prints by artists contemporary with Phyfe, looking-glasses, girandoles, and sconces. Silver and porcelains are set on the tables. The true effect of the fine

mahogany upon which Phyfe lavished such careful attention can thus be seen in association with the colors and gilding characteristic of the period.

The success of such an exhibition as this depends wholly upon the interest and generosity of the friends of the Museum. These qualities have been very marked on the part of all who have contributed their furniture, at considerable inconvenience to themselves. The thanks of the Museum and its appreciation of their kindness must be expressed to each of the lenders who has so willingly sacrificed his own comfort and convenience to the aim of helping the Museum to benefit the quality of modern cabinet-work and to increase the discrimination of public taste. These lenders to the exhibition are as follows: Mr. and Mrs. Warren B. Ashmead, Dr.

and Mrs. L. F. Barker, Mr. and Mrs. Harry H. Benkard, Mr. and Mrs. Allan B. A. Bradley, Mr. Henry de Forest Baldwin, Dr. and Mrs. Arthur W. Bingham, Mrs. Elihu Chauncey, Colonial Dames of the State of New York, Mr. F. Kingsbury Curtis, Mr. and Mrs. Robert W. de Forest, Mr. and Mrs. Francis P. Garvan, Mr. and Mrs. R. T. H. Halsey, Miss Louise Hartshorne, Miss Hendrickson, Mr. and Mrs. J. Herbert Johnston, Mr. and Mrs. V. Everit Macy, Mr. and Mrs. Howard Mansfield, Miss Jane Elizabeth Martin, Mr. and Mrs. Louis G. Myers, Mr. George B. Ogden, Miss Ogden, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Wilmerding Payne, Trinity Corporation, St. Paul's Chapel and Mr. and Mrs. John M. Woolsey.

R. T. H. H. AND C. O. C.

